

A 20-month probe pinpoints the aggressors in Indochina

WASHINGTON PLANS AN AGGRESSIVE WAR. By Ralph Stavins, Richard J. Barnet, and Marcus G. Raskin. Random House, New York. 1971. \$7.95.

By JOHN PYTTMAN

Who are the individuals who, in their role of civilian or military members of the policy-making and policy-implementing arms of the government, contributed toward involving the United States in the decades-long aggression against the peoples of Indochina?

Are these individuals, who acted in their capacity as officials and agents of the state, responsible for the consequences of their acts, or must the entire U.S. population be held responsible?

Do precedents which U.S. military and civilian officials established at the end of the Second World War throw any light on the responsibility of these individuals, any light on the answer to these questions?

In this book the authors set out to respond to readers seeking the answers to such questions. Their responses, if falling short of profundity, want for nothing in forthrightness and candor. As members of the Washington-based Institute for Policy Studies, they conducted a 20-months-long study of the U.S. aggression in Indochina, concentrating on who actually planned and decided the aggressive actions. For this purpose they interviewed more than 300 individuals and obtained use of their documents and papers, and researched files and documents of the Department of Defense, Department of State, the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

The book also contains selected documents from the U.S. occupation of Japan and Germany after the Second World War, concluding with excerpts from the statement of former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson at the Nuremberg trial of Nazi war criminals in November, 1945. The authors believe it is necessary to identify and hold the perpetrators of aggressive war responsible.

"We approached the study with two explicit biases," they say in their preface. "The first was that the war was politically and morally wrong from the outset. That bias was completely confirmed for us in the course of the study by mountains of documentary evidence, much of which has now been made public. It is a bias which, according to recent public opinion polls, a majority of the country now shares.

"The second bias was that the lawlessness of the nation-state constitutes the greatest threat to peace and human survival. The only hope of subjecting the state to law is to hold individuals who act for the state responsible for their acts. Thus the establishment of personal responsibility of national security officials for what they do in the name of the American people is the key to any program of practical reconstruction."

The book contains several flaws. There is no index, but this may be corrected in the second volume, "Washington Wages an Aggressive War," which is expected to appear in May, 1972. More important, however, are flaws in conception and analysis. Their investigation should have encompassed the period from 1945 to 1954, the first decade of the Cold War, when the direction of U.S. imperialist planning was determined. Secondly, the investigation would have been enriched by focusing more on the objective, material forces behind the aggression in Southeast Asia.

Since this latter area was not deeply probed, the authors' remedies offer little assurance for those Americans who believe that a radical change of the social system, rather than reforms of its bureaucratic structure, is required to safeguard us from more disasters.

Despite these flaws, however, the book offers convincing evidence that the bias of the authors and the American majority is correct.

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